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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ARMY COMMANDER ASKS A/S WELCH TO DELAY
ESCALATION OF PRESSURE ON SYRIA

REF: BEIRUT 1950

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires William Grant for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman told visiting NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch December 16 that the investigation into the December 12 assassination of General Francois al-Hajj was focusing on Islamic extremists suspected of trying to undermine the army. Palestinian refugee camps, until recently off-limits to Lebanese security forces, are a breeding ground for terrorists, he said. Sleiman expressed appreciation for U.S. military and political support, especially in the recent battle against Fatah al-Islam, agreeing that maintaining a unified army was key to strengthening the Lebanese state.

¶2. (C) Sleiman, the current front-runner in the presidential race, said he would forgo the presidency if necessary to avoid damage to the LAF. He was not confident he would be elected president, primarily because of the opposition's (and especially Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's) insistence on conditions such as agreement on who would occupy certain posts. However, he urged the U.S. to hold off on escalating pressure on Syria for another week to give the parties time to come to an agreement. End summary.

¶3. (C) NEA A/S David Welch met with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman on December 16. Charge Bill Grant, Deputy Legal Advisor Jonathan Schwartz, Pol/Econ Chief, and Sleiman advisor Colonel Edmond Homsi also attended the meeting.

LAF FOCUSING ON ISLAMISTS
IN AL-HAJJ ASSASSINATION

¶4. (S) A/S Welch began the meeting by expressing U.S. condolences for the death of LAF G-3 Operations Director Francois al-Hajj, who was killed in a car bomb on December 12 (reftel). Sleiman, calling LAF G-2 Intelligence Director Georges Khoury to confirm, said there was no news on the

investigation. However, the investigation was focusing on Islamists, especially Salafists, as the perpetrators of the crime. The al-Hajj assassination was similar to the 1999 killing of four judges in a courtroom in Sidon, he explained, where Palestinian extremists were suspected, though there had been no arrests. The motive in that case was, as with the al-Hajj attack, to kill the state, only this time through the army, Sleiman asserted.

PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS
THREATEN LEBANON'S SECURITY

¶ 15. (C) The Palestinian refugee camps are a big problem for Lebanon, Sleiman said. The camps have been off-limits to the Lebanese state since 1967, allowing them to become breeding grounds for extremists, ammunition deposits, explosive manufacturing, and killers for hire. A/S Welch, noting that he had discussed the issue with President Abbas, said the Palestinian Authority was trying to be helpful, but had zero influence in Nahr al-Barid and only limited ability to help in Ain el-Hilwe. The U.S., he stressed, was not promoting "tawteen" ("naturalization") of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

¶ 16. (C) Sleiman, noting that UNSCR 194 addressed the issue, said Lebanon could give the refugees homes, work opportunities, and visas, but could not solve the problem alone. The international community should pay to solve the problem in the future, he argued, adding that UNWRA's operations alone cost more than an overall solution would.

LAF SUCCESS IN NAHR AL-BARID PROMOTES
STRONGER BILATERAL MILITARY TIES

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¶ 17. (C) A/S Welch also congratulated Sleiman for the LAF's defeat of Fatah al-Islam extremists at the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian camp. This was not an easy battle, he said, and the LAF's victory boosted U.S. confidence in its abilities. Noting that these were difficult times for Lebanon, A/S Welch also stressed that it was an important time for U.S.-Lebanese relations, including the military relationship, which needs to remain solid and strong.

¶ 18. (C) Stressing that he was visiting Sleiman in his role as LAF Commander and complimenting him on his performance, A/S Welch agreed on the need to strengthen the army. Lebanon's state institutions are weak, he said, and the U.S. has made a big investment in the LAF, which it wants to continue.

SLEIMAN STRESSES LAF UNITY
OVER PRESIDENTIAL PROSPECTS

¶ 19. (C) Claiming that the presidency was not necessary for him, Sleiman stressed the importance of saving the country and keeping the army unified. Over the past few years the army had proven itself to be a "big treasure" for the country, maintaining security after the 2005 assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri and during the mass demonstrations that followed, filling the void after the withdrawal of Syrian troops, deploying to south Lebanon for the first time in 35 years following the end of the 2006 war, defeating terrorists at Nahr al-Barid, and overseeing the peaceful departure of former President Emile Lahoud.

¶ 10. (C) I am proud of the army, Sleiman said, and would forgo the presidency for its sake. We can always continue with politics, he reasoned, but we cannot lose the army. For this reason we must push the others to come to an agreement on any candidate who can get us through this difficult period, Sleiman continued. We face many challenges, and we need to remain calm, but "they" continue to block everything.

OPPOSITION IMPEDING SLEIMAN'S ELECTION

¶11. (C) Sleiman, thanking A/S Welch for U.S. political support of Lebanon, said this was a multi-confessional country where Christians felt most threatened by the current situation. They are living with their "visas in their pockets," he said, and leaving the country week by week. If there is no president by December 31, it will be a big shock for everyone, but especially for them. Other minorities, such as the Druse, also are fearful, he added. Maybe we can solve the problem, but we need U.S. help.

¶12. (C) Sleiman blamed Lebanon's political problems on a lack of confidence between the parties. This applied to everyone, he said, including himself. First he was described as being pro-March 8. Now that March 14 has nominated him as a presidential candidate, March 8 was treating him like a March 14 candidate rather than a consensus candidate. His election therefore would be difficult.

¶13. (C) Sleiman professed not to know whether the conditions regarding cabinet formation that the opposition was trying to impose on his election stemmed from opposition members themselves or from Syria. Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun refused to accept any other candidate than himself; he is obsessed by the presidency, Sleiman said, exclaiming, "Khalass!" ("Enough!").

¶14. (C) In contrast with Aoun, Sleiman said that Aoun MPs, whom he meets frequently, had a "good attitude" and some might follow the Shia Amal party in the opposition to vote for Sleiman. Aoun is a hopeless cause, A/S Welch agreed. He has made his choice and has no future in politics, he said, adding that he expected March 8 to drop him when it became clear he was no longer useful.

SLEIMAN PLEADS AGAINST IMMEDIATE
ESCALATION OF PRESSURE ON DAMASCUS

¶15. (C) The U.S. will support whichever candidate the

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majority accepts, A/S Welch continued, but the choice has to be Lebanon's. No one outside of Lebanon has the right to make that choice. Noting that he never blamed Syria publicly, A/S Welch said this was not because he did not believe Syria did not have a hand in Lebanon, but because he did not believe it was the right way to handle the problem.

¶16. (C) The U.S. will lead the international community in supporting Lebanon, he stressed, even if it means speaking out against Syria. The Arabs and the rest of the international community already are telling the Syrians to let the election take place. If Syria really wanted the election to take place, that would be more obvious than it has been, A/S Welch argued, adding that the U.S. would escalate its pressure on Damascus in the coming days.

¶17. (C) Sleiman pleaded against immediate escalation, citing possible "positive signs" from Damascus. I have heard they don't object to me, he said, but they have some conditions; maybe we can reach an agreement on those conditions. He advocated waiting one week, to see first whether parliament is able to elect a president on December 17.

¶18. (C) Furthermore, he continued, Aoun had an uncanny ability to gain increased Christian popularity from any attacks against him. If the U.S. issues a declaration against him, the Christians will see it as an attack against them, Sleiman argued, lamenting this "confessional way of thinking about politics."

¶19. (C) A/S Welch countered that the escalation would be

twofold: 1) Step up pressure for holding the election; and 2) warn against outside interference, especially from Syria. Too many people believe the U.S. has been too silent on Lebanon's presidential election, he said.

¶20. (C) Sleiman disagreed, saying the Lebanese know the U.S. position, but would like to see improved relations between the U.S. and Europe on the one hand and Syria on the other. They are therefore relieved with the findings of recent National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran, he said. The Christians especially don't like to see clashes with our neighbors, he added, because they are the ones who suffer.

¶21. (C) Maybe, Sleiman suggested, Syria itself issues the story about good relations with the U.S. to show Lebanon its strength and to harm the Special Tribunal. A/S Welch stated clearly that the U.S. relationship with Syria was not improving. The NIE is misunderstood, he said, and people too often search for what they believe is the idea behind it rather than reading what it actually says. There are no secret deals with Damascus, he stressed, and there is no

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"Lebanon" card. That is not the President's way.

¶22. (U) A/S Welch has not cleared this cable.
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